

January 6, 2009 - Murtha to Play Keystone Role in 19th Term

Pittsburgh Tribune-Review

www.pittsburghlive.com

Murtha
to play keystone role in 19th term

By Mike Wereschagin

TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Tuesday, January 6, 2009

Rep. John Murtha, who a year from now would become the longest-serving Pennsylvania congressman ever, is set to begin his 19th term today when the 111th Congress is sworn in.

His senior position on the House budget committee and experience with military issues likely will put the Johnstown Democrat at the center of the biggest policy debates of the next two years, said Berwood Yost, director of the Center for Opinion Research at Franklin & Marshall College.

Murtha is the second-ranking Democrat on the Appropriations Committee, where a federal stimulus package would take shape, and chairs the appropriations Subcommittee on Defense, where lawmakers negotiate how to pay for the nation's wars. Murtha was first elected in February 1974, when President-elect Barack Obama was 12 years old.

"He's the (Democratic) Party's main man when it comes to the defense budget," Yost said.

Though Murtha backed Sen. Hillary Clinton during the Democratic primary, the Obama administration is "going to have to deal with him in that position."

Murtha said in an interview Monday he supported Clinton because he worried Obama was too liberal, though Obama's picks for his cabinet calmed those fears.

"I'm impressed. They're overqualified in many cases," Murtha said, offering particular praise of Obama's choice of Clinton as his secretary of State nominee and retired Marine Gen. Jim Jones, who is in line to become

national security adviser.

The economic crisis will be Washington's first priority, Murtha said. He expects Obama's stimulus package, pegged at about \$775 billion, ultimately to cost \$1 trillion, including about \$300 billion in tax cuts. The challenge will be making sure the money is spent well. Murtha criticized the Treasury Department's bailout program, which has failed to unlock the credit markets despite giving banks hundreds of billions of dollars.

Murtha's willingness to spend tax dollars and his defense of congressional earmarks have prompted criticism from groups such as Citizens Against Government Waste.

That criticism, and controversy over his calling some Western Pennsylvanians "rednecks" during last year's campaign, didn't stop Murtha from winning re-election in November by a 16-point margin.

"The election showed citizens have bigger priorities" than earmark reform, Yost said. "If earmark reform mattered, John McCain would be president."

Murtha said the government could save billions by drawing down troop levels in Iraq, something Obama touted in his campaign. Murtha is wary about another Obama foreign-policy promise, though.

"I'm very nervous about getting in too far in Afghanistan," said Murtha, adding the country has a long history of repelling foreign forces.

Billions more could be saved by cutting the intelligence budget, which Murtha said overspends and underperforms.

"Our intelligence is about as good as Punxsutawney Phil's. Half the time they're right, half the time they're wrong," Murtha said.

Mike Wereschagin can be reached at mwereschagin@tribweb.com or 412-320-7900.